

# MCC Committee on Women's Concerns report



Report #54, March-April 1984

## Focus on Third World Women

This issue of *Report* celebrates the common spirit and life of women in developing countries around the world. From the time they are young children, women in the Third World learn responsibility. Starting out as "mothers' helpers" they learn early how to balance a younger child on their hips or backs, how to start wood fires, how to coax vegetables from a less-than-fertile soil and how to adapt ingeniously to the difficult situations in which many of them find themselves.

Reaching adulthood early, they are already creative, productive forces in their own settings. Yet they are deprived of social awareness, of education, of participation in the political process and of decision-making at every level except perhaps within their own families. Women in Third World countries, like many of their sisters elsewhere in the world, are the backbone of their societies but with few rights and without political power.

Learning to cope with the great physical demands of their environments as well as with the uncertainties of their lives—loss of children, absence of husbands, fickle weather patterns and changing political climates—they develop resources within themselves that run deep. But seldom are there opportunities for them to share those strengths with a larger community. Women's crucial role in the process of development has not yet been recognized.

Several years ago, after deep immersion in the lives of people in post-revolutionary Laos, I had a dream. I was holding a ball of mud in my hands. "This is gold?" I asked a woman incredulously. She nodded with a twinkle in her eyes.

As I turned the sphere in my hands, it started to erupt like a ball of elastic lava. Heaving and twisting through my fingers, it fell in gold links onto the ground. Some of the links landed intact; others broke into small pieces of gold filament and scattered here and there.

As I carefully gathered the pieces in my hands, the woman explained to me that if you pack gold in mud and isolate it, nothing will happen. But if you handle it, knock it or scratch it, the mud erupts, exposing the gold.

This issue of *Report* gathers together stories of women—scattered gold. Some of the links are whole, while others are broken fragments. But broken or whole, women in the Third World embody the resources, the spiritual energy needed to create new ways of looking at the world, new kinds of relationships between people and new discoveries about God's Spirit within us.—by Pat Hostetter Martin. Pat Hostetter Martin and Joy Hofer compiled this issue of *Report*.

## WOMEN: Sewing Our Problems Into Demands

We are pressed into the service  
of our families  
of our communities  
of our nations  
putting wings into our husband's dreams  
pouring life into our children's roots  
paving the way towards our nation's march  
but when we grow old  
traces of our lives  
are scarcely, nay  
rarely found in the  
pages of history.  
We remain unknown faces  
drying up under the weight  
of centuries of service  
losing our voice in the  
halls of "progress"  
Must we remain shadows  
in the midst of history-  
making?  
Must our lips be always  
sealed in the name of  
"peace and order"?  
LET US PRESS FORWARD  
AND BREAK THE SILENCE!  
SEW OUR PROBLEMS INTO  
DEMANDS!!

Mariya

Center for Women's Resources  
Manila, Philippines

—from *Synapses, Messages*, November 1983

## To Have a Family... To Share With Them

"The fire's burned down again," Asunta thought as she stirred the coals, bringing them closer to the sides of the dented, blackened coffee pot. "This wood burns too quickly. Roberto will have to go farther and gather some *cuche*. Its fire lasts longer."

Asunta and her husband sat silently over their breakfast of coffee and rice. This day would be the same as hundreds that had gone before. Asunta broke the silence. "We need 800 pesos for the inscription fees for school."

"Don't know where we'll get it. The rice money's gone. You know I had to sell it in January and the price has tripled." Abruptly Juan got up, picked up his machete, and walked out the door.

Asunta sighed. She could read—once—after she had been to school 20 years ago in the mountain town where she had been born.

That skill had been lost long ago, with no books, no newspapers, nothing to read. But it was a good memory—a warm feeling of accomplishment. She so wanted Roberto and Carmen to go to school, to be able to read, to have a better life.

They'd go! She'd go to the colony to work until she herself had earned their school fees. As she decided, she remembered the exhaustion that came from working 12 hours in the blazing sun. Chopping weeds from row after row of beans. Her husband couldn't go. His own *chaco* had to be weeded. But her children would go to school! She smiled to herself as she envisioned Roberto's mischievous smile.

He suddenly appeared at the edge of the cooking hut, followed by his two sisters. Asunta's day had begun....

By the time Roberto went to gather wood and the girls were sent to pull an onion, the baby awoke. As Asunta nursed him, she planned her day. The morning would be filled with washing clothes in the creek. The children would play in the water.

Sunny days were a gift from God; clothes could dry. Last week it had rained every day. Mud had to be sloshed through everywhere they went. Even the floor in the house was getting soft. This sunny day should help that also. But the roof just had to be mended. Juan would need to put on a new roof when the dry season came....

At noontime Asunta trudged the three kilometers with the baby on her back, Maria following behind. On a good day like this, Juan couldn't waste time coming home to eat. So Asunta carried the *locro* to him.

Today there had been two eggs to add to the thick rice stew. The stew was made from two of the food groups which the *gringa* had taught about—the "energy givers" and the "body builders." But there were three groups of food. If the garden had survived the flood they would have had some vegetables to eat—from the "protectors"

group. Well, soon the oranges would be ripe and that would be better than just rice and rice and rice—and sometimes an egg or two....

Asunta arrived at the fields, sweating, Maria was crying behind her. The walk was too long for such a little one. Juan would sometimes get so upset with the noise that he'd hit her, hard.

Asunta set down the kettle of *locro* and dished out a portion. The food quieted the child and Asunta sighed in relief. The three sat quietly as Juan joined them. He ate and then they began the long hot trip home.

Asunta put the two little ones down to sleep—Maria on the bed the three children shared, and the baby in the hammock to swing gently, soothingly. Asunta then settled down with the mending under the shade of the tree outside the door. Juan's shirt had patch over patch, but who needed more in the village? He had a good shirt to wear into the city. Once a year he made the trip to buy alcohol for the carnival fiesta. How she hated....

"Good afternoon, Asunta." Mercedes settled down for a chat, and started her crocheting. The mending was soon finished, and Asunta began to hem the surprise dress for Maria. Tomorrow was her third birthday.



Nicaraguan woman stands with children outside of home. Photo by Joetta Handrich Schlabach

It was a pleasant afternoon—chatting with Mercedes, hearing the children shouting with delight as they played in the ditch along the road, enjoying the coolness of the muddy water. They would learn to swim and that was good. One needed to know that in this land of water and rain. It was so different from the dry highland village where she had grown up.

Asunta heard stirrings inside the house. Maria filled a gourd with water from the clay pot and took a drink before she tottered up to sit down on the bare earth, leaning against her mother—warm, snug and safe. Asunta cuddled her close until she was fully awake. Then Asunta could wait no longer!

"Look Maria, Mommy's got a surprise for you." She pulled the dirty grey dress off the child and slipped the bright blue one over her head. The child stared down at the new cloth. Slowly she slipped her hands into the pockets. Her eyes widened and widened, and then her whole face was alight with wonder and astonishment. How could it be? Pockets!

Maria's look was too much. Asunta and Mercedes burst into laughter.

Asunta's heart was glad. To have a family, to love them, to provide for them; that was what life was for, right?

*This story, set in Bolivia, is by Helen Glick and Marcia Good Maust.*

## Roses, Bound Feet and a Boy Child

They tell us never to ask for favors from foreigners. All I want are a few short stems of roses, just six inches long that I can plant in the ground and grow into rose stalks. The stems would be hope for beauty in China. Shall I ask? In America there are so many roses and so much beauty.

I am a horticulturalist. During those ten terrible years of the Cultural Revolution the plants I tended were ripped apart before my eyes. It was a crime to keep the plants I treasured. Even a vase of wild flowers picked along a dusty road could not grace the small table in our bleak apartment. What long, dismal years those were. But now I am tending flowers again, the few that survived. But I long for roses.

I am the only one of my family who didn't leave China before the Revolution. I believed in The Great Cause. The Socialist Reconstruction would make China into a powerful China. I stayed to help.

Recently I got a letter from my sister who finally located me. She sent a picture of herself in her California home. She is sitting on a velvet sofa. Her smooth neck sparkles with jewelry. I glance down at my rough hands, and at my grey patched jacket and pants. My back is accustomed to the straight chair. We have no heat. It is forbidden by law.

I asked for the rose stems. When they arrived, they were brown and dead.

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My feet were never bound. My mother refused to let my grandmother do it. Mother unwrapped her own feet when she was grown. I can see her yet, her feet covered with the warm entrails of a freshly slain goat, trying to bring life and feeling into the crippled, deformed stubs.

I am an English teacher at a key university in China. I met my husband in America where we were both studying English. The dream of study and learning turned into a nightmare when we were called home to help in our country's Revolution. I will never forget those years nor the Cultural Revolution soon to follow. My husband was held prisoner, tortured and humiliated because we had English books and newspapers in our home. He was paralyzed for more than a year. I took care of him.

When our country's policies changed, I began teaching again, but the students come to my room because

I'm too sick to go to the classroom. I see my younger self in the eager students who come to my bedside to learn. I am dying. Every day my cough is worse. Every day I feel weaker.

My feet were never bound. My spirit was never bound. It has cost a lot to be a free spirit.

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My son is my life and my hopes. I named him "Yi," number one, because he is first in everything. I may only have one child according to our country's policy. There are too many mouths to feed in China. So, Yi ("My Boy" I call him) will be my first and only child.

How unlucky are my friends who give birth to girl babies. The son takes care of his parents in their old age. How can they rest with no one to look after them? How unhappy my husband would have been had I given him a girl child. Would he have beaten me? Would he still love me?

When my boy was very young he lived with an old woman and I visited him during my noon break. There was no other way. We must all work to build up our country. I cried for him at night. I missed him. I wanted him.

Now he is in nursery school during the daytime and lives with us at night. I spend most of my time with him when I am home. He is number one in my life. He is my Yi, my Boy, my Life and my Hope.

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These are three women in China. They are real. There are many more like them.—by Doris A. Bomberger



Chinese women gather together to talk. Photo by Doris Bomberger

## Learning to Read-or to Pat Tortillas

The fire has burned down to a few coals and the cold, damp air is penetrating my shawl. I shiver. It is very late, and I should soon join my husband and young son on the hard wooden bed. But thoughts keep going around and around in my head and will not let me sleep.

This has been a very busy day; in some ways no different from other days. I arose before the sun to start the fire, grind the corn and make the tortillas for breakfast. There were a few beans left over from yesterday, which I gave to my husband to eat. He goes out to cut wood and carries it into town to sell. He needs strength for the long walk.

After breakfast I walked to the spring to fill my water jugs. It is far away, so I told my son to stay at the house. He is in his second year and too young to walk that distance without help. No one else was at the spring, so I quickly filled my jugs and walked back home.

Then I gathered the day's wash and went again to the spring. This time I carried my little one on my back; the clothes on my head. By the time we returned to the house it was noon. We ate tortillas for lunch.

It was soon time to go to the school, for today was the first day of reading classes for the women. I was scared, but excited too. My mother came to care for my son and I kept asking her if she thought I shouldn't go. What if the others laugh at me? Can I really learn something? What if I can't understand the teacher? She really does try to speak our language but it sounds so funny sometimes.

My mother reminded me that this is what we women have wanted for so long and now, finally, we have a chance to study. She was right, of course, and I walked up the hill to the house of the *caxlan iyk*, white woman, where we were to have our class.

I discovered that about 13 other women had already arrived—a large group. We talked a lot before class, wondering what it would be like. Then the teacher said we should begin because it was an hour past starting time. She asked us why we had come, which I thought was a strange question.

But she said it was very important to think about why we were there, what we wanted to learn and why we wanted to learn. We talked about it among ourselves, then Kana Maria spoke for all of us. She said we were there because we always wanted to have the opportunity to read and write. Why? We wanted to be able to participate more in the church services, to help our children learn and also to show the men that we, too, can learn if given the chance.

We then decided as a group what days to meet and what time. I didn't say anything but I knew that some days it would be very hard to come. It seems like there is always work to do and I wasn't sure if my husband would let me come.

Someone said they were so glad to have the teacher here and thanked her for living among us and teaching

us. The teacher said something then that I've been thinking about almost all evening. She said that she didn't come here just to teach but to learn also.

To learn what? She told us that we know a lot that she doesn't; that we should be her teachers. For example, our language is very hard for her and so easy for us. That's kind of difficult for me to understand, but I'll try to help her. Also, she doesn't know how to grind corn on a stone or pat tortillas or quickly build a fire. Can you imagine? We laughed, but she laughed too and we agreed to work together and help each other to learn.

Could it really be that I know something that this *caxlan iyk* who came so far to be with us doesn't know? In a strange way it makes me feel good. I can't quite explain it because I'm not used to thinking about such things. But I feel important, as though I really am worth something. She believes that I can learn even though I've never studied. It feels good to have someone believe in me.

Now there are no coals left in the fire and morning will soon be here. I must sleep, for tomorrow will be another busy day.

*This story of a Guatemala Kekchi Indian woman is by Linda Geiser.*



Bolivian woman. Photo by Helen Gluck



## Perhaps Next Week There Will Be More

Maria shifted the thatch that last night's rains had put into disarray atop her roadside stand. The sun was still red behind the eucalyptus trees, but she knew how soon that sun could sour the juices under the ripe red skin of the tomatoes she had so carefully arranged in little towers of five each. The shade in order, she began to count out onions into little piles.

It had taken all the money from last week to buy this produce. But this time there should be a profit. She had bargained well the moonlit night before. Hearing the train pull in, she had loosened the baby's hold on her arms, risen from her grass mat and rushed down to the little station to buy these vegetables which came in from the cooler south.

Yes, this time she was sure there would be more profit. Perhaps she would buy a pair of thongs at the market, or should she do what the sister at the mission had told her about food for little Esperance? Surely the dried minnows would help him, the sister had said. Maria thought of how each tiny bone in his neck had begun to stand out, and how he didn't seem to have the energy to run around like his sisters had at his age. Yes, she would buy fish to make a nice sauce for Esperance tonight.

A cry came from the cloth slung across her back. Reaching around to cradle the tiny rounded bottom in her hand, Maria leaned to the side and pulled her youngest forward under her arm to her breast. No customers in sight, she retreated to the mango tree's shade halfway between the road and her mud-brick home. Seating herself on an overturned beer case in the quiet coolness, she felt the milk begin to flow to feed this child. Perhaps if Esperance had been able to nurse longer, he would be growing and healthy too, but this one coming the very next year....

A huge truck, smoking and roaring on its giant wheels, came to a stop in front of her stand. The driver and some of the passengers who had been perched on top of cotton bags came over to buy Maria's vegetables. When they had bought, she asked eagerly, "You work for the cotton company. Do you know where Nyembo Mafuta is now? He left me during the dry season to work on the roads with the cotton company."

No, they had not seen her *bwana*. As the truck careened on its way forward she sighed, but not for long. At least, before he had gone, her *bwana* had paid the year's tuition for Nyota, the middle daughter.

Maria watched proudly as Nyota came out of the house with her exercise books, neatly dressed in her blue skirt and white blouse. Nyota reached up to pull two bananas from the bunch hanging under the eaves of the house. Maria smiled. That girl was always eating.

Maria herself was still feeling full and comfortable from last night's *bukari*. She would not think of eating until the sun had fallen a bit in the sky and her eldest daughter had finished pounding the grain into flour for this day's stiff mush.

The morning wore on. Esperance toddled out and sat in the sun beside his mother. Neighbors passed, stopped to gossip and to buy. Crumpled bills began to fill the battered milk tin. Some women, on their way back from the fields with their short-handled hoes, had bad news.

"The boy-child at Sangwe's house had a fever, and died in the night!"

"Ehhh—," Maria felt the fear strike at her heart. "God willed it," she repeated after the other women, but her glance went to Esperance who was taking slow, small bites of rice from his bowl. Esperance, her only son. Esperance, whose very name meant Hope.

Impulsively, Maria reached into her tin of cash from the day's sales. Grasping some bills, she thrust them toward the group of women. "Take this to Sangwe, to help with the funeral. Say that Maria sent it."

She bent over to swing little Esperance up to her lap. If the money in the milk tin was not enough to buy his fish today, perhaps next week there would be more.

*By Susan Yoder Ackerman, Newport News, VA. Susan writes, "The loss of a child, the abandonment by a husband, the making of a living alone—this is so common—as is the quick generosity to others in distress, even at the expense of one's own child.... Also the idea that 'tomorrow will be better.'" Maria is from Shaba Province, Zaire.*



Refugee woman in Somalia washes hands in preparation for cooking meal.  
Photo by Frances Weaver Grill

## The Wisdom of Anna Christina

Twelve-year-old Anna Christina is the oldest child in her family. A great deal of adult responsibility already falls on her shoulders.

She labors from predawn until late into the evening with all kinds of farmhouse chores. She hikes at least twice a day to the river bank for water, a half hour's walk from her home. Generally she joins her peers from the scattered neighborhood, but there are occasions when she has to trek alone on this humdrum trail. When she is not on one of her water rounds, she tends mungo beans and sweet potatoes in her family's garden.

I visited her nipa and bamboo home and met her family. I was invited to join them at their supper of boiled eggs, rice and soup. The home was tidy and the atmosphere inside vibrated with warmth and cordiality, hallmarks of Filipino homes.

Outside in the garden, two little pigs were wolfing down throw-aways—certainly an appropriate way of taking care of garbage, as well as of fattening the pigs for meat. Anna Christina told me that the pigs would be *lechoned* (spit-roasted) in due course, one on her mother's birthday and the other on the day of the village fiesta. She told me it was better to roast a pig than to feast on the *carabao* (water buffalo) which is a valuable work animal for Filipino farmers. My little friend impressed me with her down-to-earth economics.

Anna Christina also has strong views against cock-fighting and gambling. It seems to her that most of the males in her community are more concerned about their fighting birds than they are about their families. When the mothers take the children to the river to bathe them, she says, the men will take their birds along and will spend hours on the bank gently stroking their chickens' heads.

On Sundays, they wile away their time and tempers—as well as their hard-earned pesos—in the cock-pits. The winners, usually from the city syndicates, get the money and the meat, and the rural losers are often the suckers with the odds heavily against them.

On many evenings, I joined Anna Christina and her friends on the river bank. On one of these occasions, I realized the depth and dimension of her concern for her folks in the village. She was greatly worried by the dangers that lurked in the river water. She told me that the best they could do was to boil it before use.

At first, the parents would not approve of this practice, as firewood is scarce. But the children eventually succeeded in convincing them that this was a necessary precaution to avoid the possible outbreak of undesirable water-borne infections.

Anna Christina's lessons to me in *carabao* economics, pig-protein, neighborhood concerns, water treatment, rural wants, communal issues and actions, backyard gardens and happy homes cover just about everything that is basic to human needs.

Life to Anna Christina is a perpetual challenge, and the day-to-day realities of her situation are helping condition her into a future leader in her village. She has confidence in her ability and she has the capacity and courage to face up to adverse and arduous circumstances. I have the overwhelming feeling that tomorrow's world may very well turn to the Anna Christinas for its direction.

*Adapted by Pat Hostetter Martin from an article, "Wisdom to Confound Even Wisest Scientists," written by Richard D. Karundairajan, a Sri Lankan, during a course of studies in the Rural Social Leadership Institute of Xavier University, Cagayan de Oro, Philippines.*

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## You Can Call Me Esperanza

Who am I? I am a woman, a refugee, mother of seven, perhaps something of a leader in church and community.

I should not share my name, but you can call me Esperanza. That means "hope." As you read my story, remember that our hope is in Jesus. He was poor, too. He was crucified, too. But Christ could not stay dead. Nor will we be oppressed forever.

During my early childhood, my father abandoned us. Mother and my sisters and I lived on the marginal land by the river. We cut grass to roof the house. The rain poured through, but at least the roof provided shade from the sun. We raised chickens and sometimes pigs, but the meat and eggs were always sold to buy corn or sorghum for tortillas. When there was no money we ate green bananas or nothing.

While still very young, my sisters and I were sent away to work in wealthy homes as maids. It was hard work that never ended. From six in the morning until ten at night we mopped and washed. The pay was scarce. The worst was that our employers did not respect us as human beings of equal worth. When they ate chicken, we were left with the feet.

Some years we picked coffee beans that were sent far away. They paid two colones a day (less than one dollar). With that we had to buy clothes and salt and corn. It just wasn't enough. Nor were we respected any more than we had been in the rich houses of the city.

Hoping to escape this misery, I married at age 14. Juan Miguel owned a piece of land and we built a house. Those were happy years. We worked together to care for our family.

Although we usually had enough food, life was not easy. We were still treated as objects by those who owned the plantations and stores. Talking together in the village, we came to see that we were equals with the owners. So we began to organize into groups to ask for more just pay. We protested, saying "We don't agree with the way things are."

No one asked the rich to give us all their land. We wanted only enough to live, and our rightful pay. We asked only to be recognized as equals and esteemed as workers—that they allow us some dignity....

That's when the military oppression started. Instead of paying a little more for our labor, they paid the soldiers to kill us. They massacred whole families. Even pregnant women were tortured and murdered. In the end we could no longer meet together. Worship services even had to be stopped because they said we taught dangerous things in the celebration of the Word. The persecution fell hard on those of us involved in pastoral work.

Days came when we could not stay in our own house. We took the children and abandoned our home to live with my mother. Later we had to flee to another village, then to another.

In 1981 we and many others decided to seek refuge in Honduras. Hiding in the brush and in caves we traveled three days without sleep or food. The army came looking for us like a plague of ants. They pursued us with bullets and mortar fire.

We swam over the river to Honduras amid bombs. I was seven months pregnant, so a friend helped pull me across. Some died, killed by exploding bombs. My husband's nephew was shot. One man drowned with the two children he was trying to carry through the deep waters. With the help of God, the courageous Hondurans who opened their homes to us, and some internationals, some of us survived.

In Honduras, the military persecution continued. Once, soldiers came to take 35 men. Barefoot and with a baby in each arm, I followed them—shouting in the hope that they could be delayed.

Others told me not to go: that they would kill the men anyway, that it was God's will, that they would kill me. But I knew it was not God's will. It was the will of those soldiers. I could not stay and do nothing. They stopped and beat me terribly with their guns. I told them, "God could change you to stones, but would that you be converted into human beings instead." Finally some internationals arrived, and the soldiers left without their captives.

We made a camp where we could live. We built tents and organized the distribution of food. I helped teach handicrafts and was one of the coordinators of the education program. As a delegate of the Word I led worship and Bible studies. We continued to ask questions of the scriptures. How should we live rightly? Where is God in the refugee camp? How will justice come? We talked and worked together.

It was not long before we were once more uprooted. Against our will, the camp was relocated further from our homeland. By truckloads we arrived on a cold bare *mesa*. There was no water and no sanitation. We lacked sufficient clothing and walls to keep out the harsh wet wind. Children died.

That was two years ago. Since then we have carved ourselves a life in this rocky place. Together we have built houses, latrines and schools, organized workshops and nutrition centers. With sweat and time, we've coaxed vegetable gardens out of the steep slopes. We have worked hard to create this place where we can sojourn until peace comes to our homeland—until we can return to El Salvador. But now they threaten to move us again....

Some who have seen our determination and organization look for an explanation. We are not highly educated. In my village the school went only to third grade.

We are *campesinos*, people of the land. But we have been awakened by the blows that have bruised us. For now we are refugees, but our hope does not die. In the Bible the truth is repeated—the struggle for liberation will not be left incomplete. Together God and the people must intervene. Thus we live with faith that we will again see El Salvador, with exile resurrected into hope.—by Carol Rose



Central American refugee woman and child. Photo by Philipp Hofer

## Souvanna is a Lao Gardener

Souvanna's hands deftly plucked weeds from the rows of yellow-green lettuce. The relaxed face of this Lao widow showed that she enjoyed nurturing the land to produce food.

The task of raising vegetables traditionally falls on women in Laos, and it becomes an arduous one when poultry, pigs, children and even ants ruin their fenced plots of earth. Village women spend much time chasing these invaders.

Souvanna Suksaengsumran explained why vegetable-growing is easier for her. "This garden of four hectares belongs to seven families. We share the work and the produce. Instead of having a plot near to home—and therefore near the animals—we requested a site from the Ministry of Agriculture."

Each day this 37-year-old mother or one of her four children bicycle to their communal garden. They stake tomatoes, plant seeds in raised beds every few weeks so that greens can be harvested year round, and enrich the soil with a mulch of rice husks.

The garden of these seven households was organized by the participants themselves. An elected head determines what work needs to be done, while another person is put in charge of dividing and selling produce. Half is sold at Nong Duan market, four kilometers from the island plot; the other half is divided into seven shares for the members. When the tomatoes are just beginning to ripen, all are sold; only surplus pickings are shared. Souvanna said that the week before I visited the garden she had received about three kilos of tomatoes and 15 kilos of greens. One of her favorites is swamp cabbage, a green that is high in nutrients.

The little landlocked country of Laos looks to hard-working women like Souvanna Suksaengsumran for far more than raising food. When the communist Patriotic Front formed the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975, nation-building started from scratch. Thirty years of war and foreign domination had scarred the land and the people; in its underdeveloped state, such basics as a health care system, a transportation network and production-marketing links were absent.

But before any systems could be developed, the new revolutionary government realized the need to free its 3.2 million people from illiteracy. The female half of the population had been particularly cheated. According to a government source, when Laos was a colony in the first half of this century, 99 percent of the women were illiterate. By 1975, some progress had been made, but still only one out of three could read and write.

Souvanna explained why she went through girlhood without going to school. "Our family worked as laborers; we got a share of the harvest as pay. I was the youngest of five, and if I helped also, we got a little more. So I worked in the rice fields while the rich children went to school."

But the longing to understand the delicate Lao script never died inside Souvanna. "After I got married, I

didn't think about myself because I worried how I would be able to pay for my children to go to school." Her worries increased when her husband died of cancer.

"But since the Revolution, they go to school free and I do also. Since I started in 1976, I haven't paid anything" Souvanna's eyes lit up. Clearly, a sense of wonder still surrounds this educational opportunity. For the past four years, she has studied reading, writing and arithmetic for two hours, several evenings a week, at the Bung Kha Hyong pagoda. "Now I can make a market list and read the newspaper," she said with pleasure.

In Laos, a mother has always carried much decision-making power within the family—and has usually held the purse. But since the Revolution, Souvanna and other women have also gained community responsibility. The smallest administrative unit in Laos is the *nuoy*, which may have only ten households. Several *nuoys* make up a village or *ban*, and the commune or *tasseng* is the next level. Three years ago Souvanna was elected to head her *nuoy*, which settles neighborhood disputes, handles requests for marriage permits and provides a channel for revolutionary teaching.

At a recent seminar in her *nuoy*, the leader reviewed the three cleanlinesses: Live cleanly. Eat cleanly. Drink cleanly. These directives have special implications for Lao women. As regards the third, for instance, government posters now urge women to boil the water they carry home each evening for drinking. And sanitary agents encourage communities to hang a bucket above the well so as to avoid ground contamination by the various containers used by villagers. Souvanna knows that the well 100 meters from her house is relatively safe, but she and her *nuoy* have not yet done anything to keep it so.

Although over the past four years food production and the eradication of illiteracy have taken precedence over health education, women have played a part in the slim progress made in medical services. For example, commune dispensary workers are training village health workers with the aid of a clearly illustrated manual. Both WHO and UNICEF are promoting this government effort.

For many years Lao grandmothers, the *meretou*, have gathered around sick people to give advice. Their suggested cure may be unrelated to the cause of the sickness. "Stay away from cucumbers," they may advise a fever-wracked person.

However, some traditional practices are healthful and sound. For instance, Souvanna breastfed each of her children and drank the nourishing milk of the young coconut during pregnancy, and she imagines that her daughters will do the same. When her youngest child, seven-year-old Tienchay, gets a fever and headache, Souvanna immediately thinks of malaria. She chooses one of two sources of medical treatment—a *tasseng* clinic about 300 meters from her house or a *mojah*, a Buddhist monk who knows herbal remedies. For malaria, he may recommend that Yaphagnayen, a



preparation from the roots of several trees, be taken with honey. Most of his cures are free—as indeed are the medicines at the clinic. But there may not be any malaria depressant available because commercial drugs are scarce. “It’s hard,” said Souvanna, aware that many necessities are lacking in a struggling economy.

Herbal plants do provide a useful alternative at times,” commented Souvanna. “For example, I boil the roots of the guava to make a tea to stop diarrhea.”

In an effort to equalize opportunities for men and women and rich and poor, Laos has granted people like Souvanna basic literacy skills and political involvement. As of yet, few economic improvements are among the benefits. The produce that this widow takes to the market buys few goods, and such things as school notebooks fall into the category of luxuries.

However, she remains committed to group production, hoping that her effort will increase the *tasseng* rice yield and the kilos of vegetables that she receives from the collective garden. She has a firm will to *haksaat*—a Lao verb that means “to love your own nation.”

*Reprinted from World Health by Ruth Seitz.*

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## Resources

**Women in Development: A Resource Guide For Organization and Action.** Published by ISIS (Womens International Information and Communication Service), this new resource guide provides a thoroughgoing feminist critique of the “women and development” concept. It shows how women have not only been left out by “development,” but also systematically degraded by the process. It focuses on how women are organizing themselves to realize self-determination.

Order from ISIS-USA, 712 4th Street, NE, Washington, D.C. 20002.

### Synapses Messages

This bi-monthly newsletter is committed to linking issues of justice in a domestic and international context. Regular content includes articles on spirituality and justice from a Third World perspective, as well as resource updates and action suggestions. Posters, slide sets and other resources are also available. The Philippines are particularly highlighted.

Synapses board members include **Joan Gerig** and **Dorothy Friesen**. For more information contact **Synapses**, 1821 W. Cullerton, Chicago, IL 60608. **Synapses Messages** is free, but donations are welcome!

**Connexions**. An International Women's Quarterly. Each issue focuses on a specific theme; articles are written by women from many cultures and reflect a feminist perspective. \$10 (U.S.) per year subscription. Order from **Connexions**, 4228 Telegraph Ave., Oakland, CA 94609.

**“Refugee Women and Girls,”** *Refugees*. Refugee Service of the Commission on Inter-church Aid, Refugee and World Service, World Council of Churches, 150, Route de Ferney, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland. January 1984, No. 56E. 8 pages. Examines particular hardships of women refugees, outlines proposals for priority assistance.

Burton, Eve. **“Surviving the Flight of Horror: The Story of Refugee Women.”** *Indochina Issues* 34, February 1983. 8 pages, \$1.00. Center for International Policy, 120 Maryland Ave. NE, Washington, D.C. 20002. Women refugees fleeing Vietnam often reach Thailand physically battered, and when they arrive in the United States they still bear psychological scars.

Quinn-Judge, Sophie. **“Vietnamese Women: Neglected Promises.”** *Indochina Issues* 42, December 1983. 8 pages, \$1.00. Center for International Policy (address above). Looks at the wartime promises and the current realities of women's lives in Vietnam.

**“Women's Rights.”** *Nicaragua: A Look at the Reality*. Article in newsletter of the Quixote Center, P.O. Box 5206, Hyattsville, MD 20782. May 1983. Tells the successes of the Nicaraguan Women's Organization, the improvements and remaining hopes for transformation in women's lives in Nicaragua today.

Epstein, T. Scarlett and Rosemary A. Watts, eds. **The Endless Day: Some Case Material on Asian Rural Women.** New York and Toronto: Pergamon Press, 1981. 179 pages. Essays on various aspects of women's lives in Pakistan, India, Java.

Esquivel, Julia. **Threatened with Resurrection.** Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1982. 128 pages. The poems and prayers of an exiled Guatemalan woman expressing the pain, hope and courage of the Guatemalan people. Spanish with English translation.

Huston, Perdita. **Third World Women Speak Out.** New York and Toronto: Praeger Publishers, 1979. 153 pages. Interviews with women from various walks of life in Egypt, Kenya, Sudan, Tunisia, Sri Lanka and Mexico.

Joubert, Elsa. **Poppie.** Kent, Great Britain: Hodder & Stoughton, Ltd., 1980. A wonderful, painful moving account of the life of one woman in South Africa.

Newland, Kathleen. **The Sisterhood of Man.** New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979. 242 pages. The impact of women's changing roles on social and economic life around the world.

Wikan, Unni. **Behind the Veil in Arabia.** Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982. 314 pages. On women in Amman, Jordan.

**“Women in Development: The Neglected Key.”** 17 minute filmstrip produced by Mennonite Central Committee, 1981. Available from all MCC and MCC Canada offices. Explores the problems and potential of women in development. Wherever people are poor and hungry, women are the poorest and hungriest. Yet, these women have important roles in their societies, roles that are often ignored. Study guide included.

## Contributors

*Pat Hostetter Martin worked with Mennonite Central Committee in Vietnam and more recently, the Philippines. Presently she lives in Washington, D.C., where she works as an occupational therapist with pre-school children.*

*Richard D. Karundairajan is from Sri Lanka. He prepared the paper on Maria of the Philippines during a course of studies in the Rural Social Leadership Institute at Xavier University, Cagayan de Oro, the Philippines.*

*Carol Rose works with Mennonite Central Committee in community development and with Salvadoran refugees in Honduras. She is a border monitor who accompanies new refugees crossing the dangerous border between the two countries.*

*Susan Yoder Ackerman worked with Mennonite Central Committee in Zaire and later with a U.S. AID-funded food project in Zaire. She now teaches school in Newport, Va. She is also a writer.*

*Marcia Good Maust grew up in Mexico where her parents were missionaries with Eastern Mennonite Board. She is now serving with Mennonite Central Committee in Bolivia working in community development.*

*Ruth Seitz is a free lance journalist who has lived in Africa and Asia. She writes for United Nations publications as well as a variety of other publications. She now lives in Harrisburg, Pa.*

*Joy Hofer worked with Mennonite Central Committee in Guatemala in development education. Now she is a writer in Information Services with MCC in Akron.*

*Doris Bomberger taught English in China with the China Educational Exchange program. She now teaches at Eastern Mennonite College in Harrisonburg, Va.*

*Linda Geiser worked in Guatemala with Kekchi women in a small Indian community. She also worked in Honduras with Salvadoran refugees. Presently she teaches school in Apple Creek, Ohio.*

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## News and Verbs

Correction: In *Report* #52, page 6, the second last paragraph in column 1 should begin, "Most are the **welderly** who live an active life..." The second line in column 2 should read, "Finally, the last 15% or **no-go** aged are the frail, fragile, or vulnerable, including the 5% living in institutions plus the 10% receiving care from family or friends while confined to their homes."

**Rose Buschman** of Garden City, KS is the first woman to be elected to a Mennonite Brethren District Conference executive position. She has begun serving as Secretary for the U.S. Southern District.

Donations are still needed to help **Third World Women** attend Mennonite World Conference. In 1978 over \$10,000 was raised and 16 women were able to participate in MWC in Wichita. Can we do as well or better in 1984? Please send your check or money order to: Mennonite World Conference, 528 E. Madison Street, Lombard, IL 60148. It is important that you clearly mark your contribution as follows: "MWC Travel Fund, designated for Third World Women."

**Erma Martin Yost's** 7th New York exhibition, entitled "Endangered Species: Oil-Quilt Combines" is being shown at the Noho Gallery from January 31 to February 19. According to the press release announcing the show, the artist "combines fabric patchwork panels with oil paintings to create a striking juxtaposition of abstract and figurative forms...Coming from a line of Mennonite quilters and people of the land, Erma Martin Yost 'combines' of quilt and landscape evolved from close observation. Quilt patterns were made up of repeated units abstracted from nature and observed life...and in turn, nature and life are structured in repeated patterns—like quilts. Similarly in Ms. Yost's work, fabric and painting reflect each other in original and refreshing vision."

Last summer the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution urging its churches to: "explore further opportunities of service for Southern Baptist women to insure maximum utilization of all God-called servants of our Lord Jesus Christ." It also affirmed "those women who labor for the Lord in the churches in place of special service to which God has called them." Since that time, however, several churches in Oklahoma and California were refused seating for their delegates at area meetings because they had ordained women as either deacons or ministers.

At least 175 Southern Baptist women are ordained. For the past several years, a Southern Baptist "Women in Ministry" group has been emerging with the initial meeting called by the Women's Missionary Union. Several issues of *Folio, a newsletter for Southern Baptist women in ministry* have now been published. In the fall 1983 issue the editor says, "We are not trying to justify how God's spirit is moving among women and men in our convention in relation to the issue of ministry. We seek to give account of what is happening. Women are ministering, women are preaching, and people are responding"—from a report in *The Christian Century*, February 22, 1984.

"Free Indeed—The Fulfillment of Our Faith" is the theme for the sixth plenary conference of the Evangelical Women's Caucus International. Wellesley College near Boston, Massachusetts is hosting the June 19-23 event. Keynote speakers include **Ruth Schmidt, Addie Wyatt, Kathleen Storrie, John Eldred, M. Jeanne Sproat and Letha Dawson Scanzoni**. A wide variety of theme sessions and workshops will also be offered. Early registration deadline is April 15. Contact: Registrar, Evangelical Women's Caucus—1984 Conference, P.O. Box 55, Newtonville, MA 02160.



## IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

### 7th Women In Ministry Conference



MAY 3-6, 1984

#### WOMEN IN MINISTRY CONFERENCE

Harrisonburg Mennonite Church  
Harrisonburg, VA 22801

Exploring the variety of ways  
Christian women serve and live out  
their faith.

The keynote speaker will be Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, professor of English at William Patterson College in New Jersey. A distinguished Christian scholar and speaker, Dr. Mollenkott is author of eight books, including *Women, Men, and the Bible* (Abingdon, 1977). She is active in the Evangelical Women's Caucus and the Interreligious Task Force of Women of Faith in the '80's.

The conference is open to women and men who are interested in exploring theological and practical issues related to the ways Christian women serve and live out their faith.

Individuals or congregations are encouraged to design banners for display in the Fellowship Hall.

#### WORKSHOPS

**Basic Theological and Biblical Issues of Women in Ministry**  
leader: Ron Guengerich, Hesston, Kansas

**Women in Ministry**  
leader: Joyce Shutt, Ortanna, Pennsylvania

**Called But Not "Called"**  
leader: Joyce Hedrick, Lederach, Pennsylvania

**Inclusive Language in Worship**  
leader: Mary Schertz, Goshen, Indiana

**Women As Creative Planners and Participants in Worship**  
leaders: Marilyn Bender and Melodie Davis, Harrisonburg, Va.

**Church as Changing Environment for Men and Women**  
leaders: Vida Huber and Ken Handrich, Harrisonburg, Virginia

**Committee Work: Getting a Hearing**  
leader: Mary Mae Schwartzentruber, Kitchener, Ontario

**\*The Intensive Journal—A Tool for Growth**  
leader: Helen Alderfer, Scottsdale, Pennsylvania

**Jesus' Model of Acceptance and Affirmation as a Basis for Support Groups & Networks**  
leaders: JoAnn Meyer Burke, Mary Jane Hershey and Patricia Swartzendruber, Hatfield, Pennsylvania

**Improve Leadership Skills by Understanding Self and Others**  
leader: Leona Weaver Schmucker (\$5 charge for Personal Profile System), Hesston, Kansas

**Dealing With Conflict**  
leaders: Kathy Fairfield and Barry Hart, Harrisonburg, Virginia

**Your Sister's In Jail**  
leader: Dorothy McCammon, Goshen, Indiana

**Men and Women Deal With Sexual Abuse**  
leader: Ethel Metzler, Goshen, Indiana

**We Together: Working Toward Mutuality in Marriage**  
leaders: Duane and Nancy Sider, Charlottesville, Virginia

**Pathfinding in Midlife**  
leaders: Ruby Wiebe and Lourene Bender, Harrisonburg, Va.

**Women's Development and Counseling**  
leaders: Ruth Guengerich and Jacqueline Driver, Hesston, Kansas and Harrisonburg, Virginia

**"In Print"—Reflections of Women Through *Gospel Herald* '79-'83**  
leader: Dorothy Yoder Nyce, Elkhart, Indiana

**Friendship Ministry**  
leader: Ella May Miller, Harrisonburg, Virginia

**Self-worth Shapes Familial Relationships**  
leader: Verla Dick, Topeka, Kansas

**Women and Eating Disorders**  
leader: Kathryn Klassen Neufeld, Fresno, California

**Dreams and Wholistic Health**  
leader: Ellyn Hartzler Cowels, Lynchburg, Virginia

Each workshop will be offered two times during the weekend.  
\*Will be offered once in two parts, the first on Friday and the second on Saturday.

**Lodging:** EMC Campus dorm — \$8 per night double occupancy; \$10 per night single occupancy. (There will be a reduced rate if you bring your own linens.) Private homes are available, contribution encouraged.

**Registration Fees:** \$35 if mailed on or before April 15; \$40 if mailed after April 15; \$17.50 daily registration. Registration fee includes the noon and evening meals on Friday and Saturday. Breakfast will be available at a cost of \$2.25. Dorm and breakfast fees may be paid upon arrival.  
Canadian attendees bring U.S. dollars.

**REGISTRATION:** Complete and mail by April 15th to Women in Ministry Conference, c/o Margaret Alger, Eastern Mennonite College, Harrisonburg, VA 22801.

## News and Verbs (continued)

Approval for a half-time voluntary **staffperson for the Committee on Women's Concerns in Canada** was received at the January MCC Canada Annual Meeting. A woman is being sought for the position starting in mid-summer. Her tasks will include networking, resourcing and information sharing among Canadian women; encouraging all-Mennonite women's gatherings at the provincial level; working with provincial peace committees, the Peace and Social Concerns office and the Canadian members of the Committee on Women's Concerns. Activities will focus on increasing the awareness of women's concerns and understanding the biblical basis for these concerns. A Winnipeg location is preferred. Contact MCC Canada Personnel Services, 201-1483 Pembina Highway, Winnipeg, MB R3T 2C8.

An **Akron-based staffperson for the Committee on Women's Concerns** is needed by the end of June 1984. The assignment for this voluntary service position includes half-time for women's concerns and half-time for military tax concerns in the U.S. Peace Section office. Apply to MCC Personnel Services, 21 South 12th Street, Akron, PA 17501.

**Mary Oyer** has been elected chair of a council that will produce a new Mennonite/Church of the Brethren hymnal in 1992. The council will consider theology of worship, the meaning of language and how the particular Believers' Church tradition informs worship practice as it begins the cooperative venture. —*Mennonite Weekly Review*, February 23, 1984, p. 3.

**Kathryn Neufeld, Ruth Krall and Jeannette Ratzlaff** are among the resource persons for a symposium on "Women: Psychology and Theology" to be held April 5 and 6 at the Fresno Airport Holiday Inn, Fresno, California. The event, sponsored by Mennonite Mental Health Services and Kings View Corporation, is billed as

"a symposium of discovery about women...a time of affirmation... clarification... celebration." Keynote speakers are Anne Wilson Schaef, author of *Women's Reality: An Emerging Female System in a White Male Society* and Linda Mercadante, teaching fellow at Princeton Seminary. For information contact Bonnie Boldt, (209) 638-2505; Kings View Corporation, P.O. Box 512, Reedley, CA 93654.

A resolution to establish a Select Committee on Hunger was passed February 22 by the U.S. House of Representatives. The 17-member committee will study issues related to U.S. policy on domestic and world hunger, including U.S. development assistance, food production and distribution, international development institutions and food assistance programs. Joseph Short, executive director of Oxfam America, says, "We examine daily the hunger holocaust, at home and abroad, much of which takes the form of undernutrition...The American government must focus on the crisis of hunger. The Select Committee can achieve that focus."

The *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* will begin publication with a fall/winter 1984 issue. To be published semi-annually, this new scholarly journal is designed to provide an outlet for feminist research in religion, and to encourage discussion among persons of differing feminist perspectives. Editors are **Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza**, University of Notre Dame, and **Judith Plaskow**, Manhattan College. Yearly individual subscription rate is \$15. To subscribe, write to: Membership Services, Scholars Press, 101 Salem Street, P.O. Box 2268, Chico, CA 95927.

Forthcoming *Reports* will focus on:  
May-June 1984 Impact of Childbearing/Childlessness on Women's Lives  
July-Aug. 1984 Friendship and Community  
Sept.-Oct. 1984 Women and Poverty  
Nov.-Dec. 1984 Women and Body Image

*REPORT* is published bi-monthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. It strives to promote this belief through sharing information, concerns and ideas relating to problems and issues which affect the status of women in church and society. Articles and views presented in *REPORT* do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committee on Women's Concerns. Correspondence should be addressed to Editor Sue Clemmer Steiner, Apt. 3, 87 Westmount Rd. North, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 5G6.

To subscribe or change your address, please send your old address with your new address to: MCC, 21 South 12th Street, Akron, PA 17501. Allow 2-4 weeks for address change. Contributions welcome.

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